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Southwestern Georgia of the 19th Century in the Opinion of Foreigners: Analysis of Archival Materials

Południowo-zachodnia Gruzja XIX wieku w ocenie cudzoziemców: analiza materiałów archiwalnych

• Abstract •

The historical fate of one of the most critical regions, Southwestern Georgia, is indeed remarkable. This powerful centre of Georgian civilisation, with its historical plight, was forcibly torn off a mother's bosom and became a part of another state. However, its inhabitants managed to preserve the love and respect for their native language. As a result of the war between Russia and Turkey (1877–1878), the region was reunited with its native land. Still, this time the Caucasian administration of the Russian Empire began to impede its development and tried to set this side against the rest of Georgia. According to Russian officials, it was to become an essential military outpost of Russian expansion in the Middle East and a springboard for the far-reaching plans of the empire.

Foreigners were also interested in this region of Georgia. They repeatedly visited this area and left us remarkable materials about the political, social, economic, cultural and educational life

• Abstrakt •

Dzieje południowo-zachodniej Gruzji, jednego z najbardziej kluczowych regionów kraju, są zaiste niezwykle. Ten potężny ośrodek cywilizacji gruzińskiej o trudnym położeniu historycznym został siłą wyrwany z macierzystego łona i stał się częścią innego państwa. Mieszkańcom regionu udało się jednak zachować miłość i szacunek do ojczystego języka. W wyniku wojny rosyjsko-tureckiej (1877–1878) doszło do ponownego włączenia terytorium do ojczyzny. Jednak tym razem kaukaska administracja Imperium Rosyjskiego zaczęła hamować jego rozwój i próbowała antagonizować region wobec reszty Gruzji. W mniemaniu rosyjskich urzędników miał się on stać ważną placówką militarną rosyjskiej ekspansji na Bliskim Wschodzie i zarazem odskocznią dla dalekosiężnych planów imperium.

Zainteresowani wspomnianym regionem Gruzji byli również obcokrajowcy. Wielokrotnie odwiedzali te tereny, pozostawiając potomnym niezwykle materiały dotyczące życia politycznego,

of South-West Georgia of that time (i.e., 19th century). społecznego, gospodarczego, kulturalnego i edukacyjnego południowo-zachodniej Gruzji XIX wieku.

Keywords: Southwestern Georgia; notes of foreigners

Słowa kluczowe: południowo-zachodnia Gruzja; zapiski cudzoziemców

The historical fate of one of the most critical regions, Southwestern Georgia, is remarkable. This powerful centre of Georgian civilisation, with its historical plight, was forcibly torn off a mother's bosom and became part of another state. However, its inhabitants managed to preserve love and respect for their native language. As a result of the war between Russia and Turkey (1877–1878), the region was reunited with its native land, but this time the Caucasian administration of the Russian Empire began to impede its development and tried to set this side against the rest of Georgia. According to Russian officials, it was to become an important military outpost of Russian expansion in the Middle East and a springboard for the far-reaching plans of the empire.

Foreigners were also interested in this region of Georgia. They repeatedly visited this area and left us remarkable materials about the political, social, economic, cultural and educational life of South-West Georgia of that time (i.e., 19th century).

It is interesting to consider a document written by an English businessman Martin Ball about his arrival to Batumi from Istanbul in August 1804. Ball describes the social life of Batumi of that time. He spent three months in the town and left it because of the illness.

Ball notes that Batumi is a very dirty and messy town, although it can be hardly called a town – there are only three streets and a few cemeteries at the end of each street. These cemeteries are so abandoned that there is a terrible stench in the heat. “The climate of Batumi is unbearable”, the Englishman writes, and adds: “Nobody remains in the town for a long time. Those who arrive, leave Batumi in the near future. I also caught some illness and have to leave this town”.

Speaking about the population, Ball mentions that people in the town mainly speak Turkish, but one can also hear Greek speech, and in some places they speak the Laz language. There are no public facilities in the town, except for two cafes, where all the residents of the town gather. “The port of Batumi is a mess and ships do not enter there. During my stay, only two Turkish ships entered the harbour and quickly left it...”. Such was Batumi of 1804, seen through the eyes of the Englishman (Central State Historical Archive of Georgia, No.124, Descr.14, Case 567, p.100).

The French Louis Cooper and Marcel Fontrier provided interesting information about Batumi and its environs. Their records show that in October 1810 they were in Batumi. They note that the Turks began construction work in the town, but did not finish it. The French note that there were black workers among the builders, who told that they had come from North Africa and some of them even settled in Batumi as the Turkish government gave them the permission. They built a two-story wooden building for the Turkish head of Batumi.

The head of Batumi was an overweight unattractive man. According to the eyewitness, he often left the city and did not return for a long time. Dissatisfied residents sent complaints to the Istanbul authorities. Cooper and Fontrier also note the following: “During our stay in Batumi, a terrible murder occurred: because of jealousy, a jealous husband stabbed his wife, killed her lover and members of her family. This man was arrested and convicted by judges, who specially arrived on this occasion from Istanbul. The trial took place on the main square of the town, and residents of Batumi and its environs attended the event. The judge asked the people what their opinion was about the verdict. The population shouted that the killer should be hanged. And in fact, the killer was hanged there on a pole, and he stayed there for two days, then they removed him, though we don’t know where they buried him...”.

The French say that ships often called at the port of Batumi and imported various goods into the town. That was Batumi seen by the French in 1810. The remaining entries also describe other places located on the Black Sea, and they are surely of interest to researchers, but we will not discuss this issue in the present article (Saint-Petersburg State Historical Archive, Caucasus Foundation No. 574, Case 1234, p. 11).

Foreigners’ visits to Batumi seem to have become more frequent since 1820. This was probably due to the causes of the impending war between Russia and the Ottomans. Since that time, a lot of Russians have also been found in Batumi. For example, in 1821, Nikolaev, Davydov and Sergeev visited Batumi. They left no records about the town. The Turkish authorities took Sergeev under suspicion, since he was a frequent visitor of a coffee house and liked talking with townspeople. He was detained but then released (Saint-Petersburg State Historical Archive, Caucasus Foundation No. 574, Case 1234, p. 67).

In April 1822, a French ship arrived in Batumi. One of the passengers, Alessandro Kostilevsky, went ashore for some time. The archive does not indicate which state he was from, but it can be assumed that Kostilevsky was supposed to be in Batumi for military insurance operations. Kostilevsky noted that: “Russia will face great resistance during the upcoming battle for Batumi. The Ottoman government

is carefully preparing to strengthen the town. An artificial fortress was built on its eastern shore, which controls all vehicles in the water area. The construction of a similar fortress began in the western direction of the port. Ottoman soldiers move around the city. As for the population, you cannot say that it is colourful. Most of them are Ottomans, but sometimes Georgians who are part of the Russian Empire, a neighbor of Turkey, come and trade in the city. They are under special supervision of the Ottoman authorities. They mostly sell household goods. The largest customers are two large stores located near the port, where they sell goods, brought directly from ships. One of the shopkeepers is of English origin, but he is Turkified... Roads are being built from the city to the suburbs. The construction is carried out by German engineers, but it seems that these roads will be used for military purposes...". Then Kostilevsky briefly describes the clothes and everyday life of people living in Batumi (Saint-Petersburg State Historical Archive, Caucasian Foundation No. 574, Case 1234, pp. 99–101).

Such information is given in the reports of an official from Russia, Simon Ginzburg, who visited Batumi in 1823. According to his entries, the Ottomans were convinced that Russia will not be able to retake Batumi. He also notes that in Batumi he met the Armenian and Greek population and found out that they were loyal to Russia. It should also be noted that Simon Ginzburg (this is probably him, since the name and surname do indeed coincide) stayed in Guria in 1825 and left some interesting facts about the social and domestic situation in the region. He talks about the Principality of Guria and notes the following: "Guria is located in the extreme southwestern part of the Russian Empire. Previously, this principality was an independent political entity. After it was included in the Russian Empire [although in 1825 it was still formally independent – O.G. & E.M.], life became relatively calm there. However, there is still a mess in the principality. The Russian army is deployed on the territory of the principality. Local authorities are confused. The Russian authorities mainly control the situation in the principality. The local governor is ill and the principality is mainly headed by his wife Sophia, but Russian military commanders do not take her seriously. The center of the principality is Ozurgeti. There is no normal public place in Ozurgeti. The governor of the town built one two-story building with a store on the first floor and a tavern on the second one".

Records show that the Gurians are very energetic people. Also, they used to trade prisoners in their principality. Prisoners were bought by everybody – from the family of the governor to the peasants. Villagers in Guria were often attacked by armed units from neighboring Kobuleti and were abducted for sale in Ottoman Turkey. As Ginzburg notes, "Kobuleti, according to locals, had previously belonged

to the Principality of Guria for a long time, until the Ottomans captured this territory, and now it has become a nest of robbers, who are engaged in human trafficking. Although, the Gurians also often move to Kobuleti and abduct people there – some are forced to work in their homes, and others are sold to the Ottomans. If such attacks end in failure, then the furious Gurians hung a captive on a tree in order to frighten others. All Gurians are armed; they are hospitable, however, they are also very hot-tempered and vindictive. In Guria, a trade (purchase and sale) is poorly developed, there is almost no money in circulation, people exchange natural products, mainly from the neighboring regions of Imereti and Samegrelo. In addition, smuggled goods come from neighboring Kobuleti and are mainly purchased by members of the governor's family and relatively rich people... Guria is a very beautiful place with a breathtaking landscape that leaves a lasting impression. One Russian soldier told me that he fought in many places, but never met such a beautiful land...". We believe that these notes of Ginzburg deserve attention for studying the history of Guria of that time (Saint-Petersburg State Historical Archive, Caucasian Foundation No. 574, Case 1234, pp. 118–124).

Interesting information about Batumi is provided by an Austrian traveller Gerhard Buchwald, who was in Batumi for a short time in 1833. He arrived in Batumi from Tbilisi, then travelled to Trabzon and Istanbul. As records show, Buchwald is an Ottoman with benevolent feelings. He notes that the Ottomans are trying to regulate urban life. "Wherever I go", writes Buchwald, "construction is underway everywhere. The Ottomans have great respect for the Europeans, who are friendly towards them, and I felt this everywhere. Such an attitude is not felt among the people occupied by Russia and in Russia itself, where Europeans are received coldly. I felt this in Tbilisi, Baku and other cities". Buchwald says about Batumi that "it is an Ottoman town, the inhabitants of which are Ottomans. They are very hospitable people". However, the Austrian says that he also met some Greeks, Armenians, Negroes and Europeans in the town. Buchwald notes that the port of Batumi is well equipped, the Ottoman authorities have done significant work there. "As I found out, a senior Ottoman official, who had arrived in the city, convened a meeting and ordered the local authorities to clean up the port of Batumi; he also promised to provide large sums of money. The money actually came from Istanbul, and even a lot of workers arrived from the center and started equipping the port and surrounding territories. There was performed a serious work, roads were brought to the port, the port territory was expanded, the construction of a new dock and bridge over the river by the sea began. The Ottomans are well aware that the port of Batumi is one of the most advantageous strategic places in the Black Sea and needs to be improved. This point of view was especially strengthened among the Ottomans after the recent war

with Russia. They understand that Russia was interested in Batumi and was doing everything possible to occupy it”, the author writes. “I spoke with a senior official in Batumi, and he said that Batumi should be turned into an impregnable fortress so that the enemy could not take it. The authorities will do everything to protect Batumi from the evil intentions of the conquerors. This is our main port, and from there we can successfully, easily and simply solve our problems”, notes Buchwald. However, one important point must be noted as well. Speaking about the population of the town, Buchwald does not mention that there were also many Georgians in the town, although this fact is clearly noted in various entries of other Europeans. This can be explained by the circumstance that Buchwald was so angry with the people that were part of the Russian Empire that he was trying to get away from the truth, or maybe he was not in Batumi for long, as he noted, and did not meet Georgians, although, the latter is hard to believe (Saint-Petersburg State Historical Archive, Caucasian Foundation No. 578, Case 1235, p. 335).

Unlike Buchwald, Douglas Stevens, an English officer who visited Batumi and Trabzon in 1837, speaks of a large number of Georgians in Batumi. It is noteworthy that Stevens and his companion, another Englishman Martin Howard, arrived in Batumi from Ozurgeti. They also visited Tbilisi, Kutaisi, and Zugdidi. The British provide small but interesting information about these cities. As for Ozurgeti, the Englishman notes that he spent only three days there. He does not consider Ozurgeti as a city – there is only one street and only three relatively equipped houses, one of which belongs to the governor of Ozurgeti. On the eastern side of Ozurgeti there is a large meadow, where trade fairs are organized on Saturdays and Sundays, and many people gather, sell and buy mainly agricultural products; especially, there are a lot of cattle buyers among peasants. The author notes: “I’ve just got to such a market in Ozurgeti, and among the merchants there were Ottoman Turks who sold fabrics, raisins and date fruits. As I found out, fights were not rare among merchants, however, unfortunately, I could not get to know this region better, because I had to leave it very soon”.

Stevens writes the following about Imereti: “As I found out, Kutaisi, the place where I was staying, belonged to the kingdom of Imereti and was its capital. For a long time, this kingdom was ruled by Tsar Solomon, who heroically fought against the Russians; he was a symbol of independence and enjoyed the greatest support of the people. Nostalgia for him was still felt in Kutaisi. Solomon was defeated and expelled by the Russians to Ottoman Turkey, where he died. Compared to other cities, Kutaisi is large and well-equipped. The Russian authorities in Kutaisi have started works on repairing the roads. The bridge being built across the Rioni River is the most well-equipped building, there is a hospital and several hotels as well. The

people here are proud and self-confident. They like to live in taverns, which seem to be a lot here”. Then the author adds: “It is also interesting to see a wedding here; during the event, the newlyweds ride around the city on a chaise, and their guests shoot into the air, thereby informing everyone that this is a wedding. The local Russian administration is looking suspiciously at foreigners. My friend and I felt this from the very first day after our arrival, when we stayed at the hotel. We soon left this place and headed to the neighboring area, which the locals call Samegrelo; from there we wanted to move to Abkhazia, but we couldn’t”. Indeed, Stevens went from Ozurgeti to Zugdidi, and from there he travelled to Batumi and Trabzon. It is not clear why he changed his route – there is no mention of it. Perhaps the Russians did not allow him to go to Abkhazia, or there was another reason, unknown to us (Central State Historical Archive of Georgia, Caucasian Foundation No. 124, Descr. 14, Case 567, p. 188).

Stevens describes Zugdidi in the following way: “Zugdidi is not a very populated area. It is much smaller than Kutaisi. There are only few streets and those are not well-maintained. There are several newly built two-story houses. Abkhazia is located near Zugdidi, we wanted to go there, but Russian soldiers were standing at the Abkhazian border and did not allow us to cross the border. The population in Zugdidi was no different from Kutaisi and Ozurgeti. Here people wear Chokhas (traditional Georgian garment), speak their own language [Stevens does not mention it as Mingrelian – O.G. & E.M.], the women here are very beautiful and proud. They tend to dress well and wear jewellery. My surprise knew no bounds when I saw the French arriving in Zugdidi from France, they had been there for several months. They told me that they came here on some business [Stevens does not mention what kind of business it is – E.M. & O.G.]. And like in Ozurgeti, there are held large trade fairs, where everyone sells or buys everything, including goods imported from Turkey”. Stevens does not say anything about the Principality of Samegrelo and its administrative structure.

As for Batumi, Stevens stayed here for a relatively long time and carefully studied the current situation in the town. After visiting a large market in Batumi, he notes that among the merchants and customers there are also people who speak Georgian. Stevens is astonished to say that they trade both in Ozurgeti and Zugdidi and seem to move freely throughout the Ottoman Empire: “It is also interesting that Ottoman soldiers do not create any obstacles for them at the border. One person who came for trade in Batumi from Zugdidi brought with him 30 heads of cattle for sale. The soldiers freely passed them across the border. There are also many Ozurgetians in Batumi, they first trade in Kobuleti, and then go to trade in Batumi, and this happens systematically. The Georgians have no obstacles to enter or exit when

returning goods, but, as I heard, Russian soldiers take bribes, and the Georgians are well aware of this, they bribe them with vodka and they get so drunk that the merchants sometimes even take their weapons away. Also, many Georgians go to fairs to Trabzon”.

Talking about trade in Trabzon, Stevens says that it is carried out through exchange of goods, although money is also used, mainly by Ottomans. They require money for goods, and if a customer does not have it, they agree to an exchange. As for Trabzon, Stevens notes that Georgians from Lazistan are especially active here. They dominate both in trade and other fields of activity, but especially in craft. Stevens says that Lazians are famous craftsmen: “They make different things in their workshops and sell them at fairs. There are several dozens of such workshops in Trabzon; knives, daggers, swords and firearms are made there. Although, there is a tax on the sale of firearms. As I learned in Trabzon, the government decided to categorically ban the export of firearms beyond the Ottoman border, tightening border controls. According to this decision, if someone is found with weapons at the border, they will be sentenced to imprisonment. I have never seen such workshops in Batumi”. Stevens also says that in the Batumi district administration there are mainly Ottomans, but in the administration of Trabzon the main places are occupied by Lazians. This is a very interesting circumstance.

Stevens also notes that there are bakeries at Batumi fairs, where Georgian bread, called by locals *lavashi*, is baked. The author also talks about taxes and notes that taxes for the inhabitants of Batumi and its environs are different from taxes for the people living in Trabzon: “In Batumi, taxes are collected by courtiers specially sent by the Sultan to Batumi, while in Trabzon this is done by local authorities. Refusal by a taxpayer to pay taxes can even lead to imprisonment, or public incrimination. I witnessed such an incident in Trabzon, when a man who systematically avoided paying taxes, despite repeated warnings, was beaten with rods right in the square. Although such things do not happen in Batumi, as the locals told me, and when I asked about the reason, they replied that the people who live in Batumi are Adjarians and they are of Georgian origin; they are dangerous and can cause unrest, therefore, the authorities of the Ottoman Empire try to be careful with them”. These are the noteworthy reports about Batumi, Trabzon, Ozurgeti, Zugdidi and Kutaisi, left by the Englishman Douglas Stevens (Central State Historical Archive of Georgia, Caucasian Foundation No. 124, Descr.14, Case 569, pp. 5–34).

In 1842, a military officer of the Russian army, Colonel Y. Proskuryakov, was in Batumi with a military mission. He left interesting entries about Batumi. Proskuryakov notes that Batumi can be called a town, and that there are several interesting buildings and mosques. Proskuryakov indicates that construction is

underway in this region, and the southern part of the bay is already a fairly populated area. Construction work was also carried out on the east coast of the bay. The Russian colonel notes that Batumi is the center of the district; the Ottomans call it Sanjaki. Batumi is ruled by sanjakbegs, and the town also has a judge, who resides in a separate building. He is also the judge of all Batumi. Proskuryakov also indicates that earlier on the territory of the town there used to be a conical fence of the fortress. Here he saw the ruins of a church. In the western part of the bay, there is a place for trade and the residence of the Sanjakbeg and the English resident; a little distance away there are several noisy taverns, where fights usually take place in the evenings. The English resident asked the Sanjakbeg to move these taverns to another place, but in vain. Proskuryakov also mentions that at that time in Batumi there were more than 300 houses and about 2,000 residents of both genders. As for the language of the population, the Russian notes that the Georgian and Ottoman languages are mainly heard in the town, although, Georgian is much more prevalent. Most of the population is engaged in shipping and trade. Proskuryakov also visited the suburbs of the town. He points out that “the outskirts of the town are covered with swamps and shrubs. The climate of the town is very injurious to health; terrible diseases are rampant in the town and they take human lives. Because of this, the residents of Batumi leave the town in summer and go to the mountains”. Notes by Y. Proskuryakov are very remarkable for studying the history of Batumi of that time (Central State Historical Archive of Georgia, Caucasian Foundation No. 124, Descr.14, Case 569, pp. 89–96).

Conclusion

Thus, the presented work is dedicated to foreign travellers, scientists and military personnel, who were in the south-west of Georgia, both during the Ottoman internment and the occupation of Tsarist Russia. They left us valuable information about the political, social, economic, cultural and educational life of the region. These materials are unique and valuable in studying the history of Southwestern Georgia.

References:

- Central State Historical Archive of Georgia, No.124, Descr. 14, Case 567, p. 100.
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